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SUBJECT: TURKISH MEDIA REACTION
TUESDAY, OCTOBER 27, 2009

Media Highlights: PM Erdogan on Iran; US Religious Freedom Report
Rattles; PKK Returnees Postponement Update;
Debate over Army "Coup Document"

Erdogan on Iran

PM Erdogan's interview with The Guardian is extensively covered in today's papers. Mainstream Hurriyet headline reads "PM Erdogan Supported Iran, Criticized Israel"; Milliyet headline reads "Ahmedinejad is Our Friend"; Sabah headline says "Erdogan's Reminder of Lieberman Annoyed Israel"; liberal Radikal "The West Should Look at Itself, Instead of Iran". Hurriyet notes that, during the interview, PM Erdogan dismissed rumors that Iran is seeking a nuclear weapon and stressed that Iran's efforts for nuclear power is only for energy purposes. With his remarks, Erdogan criticized Israel and supported Iran, the paper notes. Hurriyet notes that Erdogan also said "the US policy in this region is not dictated by Israel." He also reminded that Israeli FM Lieberman had threatened Gaza in the past to use nuclear weapons against it. Nationalist Tercuman predicts that Erdogan's harsh criticism of Israel will trigger a deeper turmoil than the crisis in Davos. As a summary, The Guardian wrote at the end of the interview that "Friendly toward a religious theocratic Iran, covetous and increasingly resentful of a secular but maddeningly dismissive Europe: it seems the perfect summary of Turkey's east-west dichotomy."

Commentary. In "Erdogan Is not Iran's Defense Lawyer" Milliyet columnist Semih Idiz agrees with PM Erdogan's effort "to balance the nukes rhetoric by forcing Israel to be part of NPT." He wrote in mainstream Milliyet: "Turkey is certainly disturbed about nuclear armament as expressed by PM Erdogan in many occasions. However, PM Erdogan is also trying to draw international attention toward Israeli nuclear arsenal and considers as another factor for regional tension along with Iran." Mr. Idiz says this approach may be seen as "Turkey has become Iran's defense lawyer" but the main goal is "to put the nukes issue in a balanced frame."

US Religious Freedoms Report Rattles

Mainstream and conservative media carry early assessments of the report but emphasize different aspects. In "Serious Violations," mainstream Milliyet claims that the report says Turkey respects religious freedom but in order to protect the secular state, it puts

limitations on religious groups. Conservative Samanyoluhaber, the wire service for the Islamic-leaning media in Turkey, headlines in a lengthy report titled "US Says: Islamic Restrictions in Turkey" that secularism is an obstacle against religious freedom. Meanwhile, mainstream Hurriyet in "US Warns Turkey on Secular State" carries excerpts from the report and also notes that restrictions continued for Islamist expressions in state institutions and the universities, as well as the wide prohibition of the Islamic-style headscarf. All papers note that, according to the report, some Muslims, Christians and Bahais have been subjected to restrictions and sometimes, harassment. Additionally, that the report noted that the Turkish state does not accept conscientious objection to military service, which is compulsory in Turkey. Media report that the Religions Freedom Report observes that Islamic sects and communities, which were banned in the 1920s, were still "active and widespread." Reports also emphasized that Turkish authorities placed important restrictions on the administration of the Greek Orthodox churches, and refrains from recognizing the Ecumenical status of the Istanbul-based Greek Orthodox Patriarch. All media noted that the report underlines the fact that "nationalist sentiments in Turkey sometimes adopt anti-Christian and anti-Semitic tones," and quotes the members of the Jewish community in Turkey that they saw anti-Semitic feelings going up after the Israeli operations on Gaza. More commentary is expected on Wednesday.

Turkey's Search Continues for Return of the PKK (Cumhuriyet)
Under the headline, "Iraq Formula for the Return of the PKK," leftist-nationalist Cumhuriyet says the AKP government would continue the returns, but wants it to happen "without problems." According to a formula discussed with the Iraqis, the PKK members

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who were not involved in crimes against Turkey will be given Iraqi citizenship and stay in Iraq. An "understanding" was signed with the Iraqi government and the government in northern Iraq on the matter. The militants who were not involved in crimes will be allowed to return to Turkey. Concerning the PKK leadership, talks will be held with third countries to send the leaders out of Iraq. Some figures among the PKK leadership, however, might want to continue politics by joining the Kurdish political parties in Turkey or Iraq, says Cumhuriyet. Meanwhile, papers also report a statement from DTP leader Ahmet Turk as promising more sensitivity with upcoming returnees. The DTP leader Ahmet Turk, speaking at a press conference on Monday, said his party will act more sensitively when it comes to the return of groups affiliated with the PKK.

Turkish Armed Forces Initiates New Investigation for Alleged Military Document

Mainstream Sabah reports that the Turkish General Staff (TGS) initiated a new investigation on Monday after certain news stories in Turkish media speculated about an original document on the fight against fundamentalism. The news stories argued that the signature on the relevant document was real. Mainstream Hurriyet headline reads "The Investigation Initiated at 13.30 on Monday" and reports that the TGS finds the timing of the recent release of an alleged military document suspicious and meaningful. The TGS also says it still has doubts over the authenticity of the document. Sabah headline says "The Prosecutor is After Colonel Cicek and Five Privates"; liberal Radikal quotes PM Erdogan as saying regarding the document "I hope that the allegations are not true. Turkish Republic could not digest such things. I will discuss the issue with TGS Chief General Basbug at our regular weekly briefing." Leftist Taraf gives extensive front-page coverage to the words of Deputy Prime Minister B|lent Aring that it was time to take action against the members of the military junta plotting a coup against the government. Mainstream Milliyet quotes MHP deputy chair Oktay Vural as saying on the issue "If there is a power to end the AKP government, that will be either us or the people at the elections. I want the truth, is this issue being used by the AKP government to change the agenda, and divert everyone's attention from their democratic opening fiasco?!"

Commentary. The alleged coup document of the army dominates the columns for Turkish pundits. Islamist leaning and conservative writers call for the Chief of General Staff's "retirement or

resignation" while moderate writers mostly express trust that the top rank command "will do whatever necessary to punish the responsible ones."

Islamist oriented Yeni Safak writers, Tamer Korkmaz and Ali Bayramoglu hold chief of general staff responsible for this, and mainstream Sabah's Nazli Ilicak joins their approach by saying: "At this point what will happen to General Basbug is very important. He seems to have two options; retirement or resignation."

In "Basbug Will Do Whatever Necessary" columnist Fikret Bila expresses trust in General Basbug and army's loyalty to democracy. In mainstream Milliyet he states: "Given General Basbug's earlier statements as he was repeatedly pledging loyalty to democracy and rule of law, he will undoubtedly go till the bitter end and find out who is behind this document and what is all this about."

In "Worth Thinking Results for the Army" columnist Sedat Ergin notes that there are credible facts to believe the document is genuine. Given this fact, he calls the army to focus on its military duties only. In mainstream Hurriyet he suggests: "It is not pleasant to see that there are still out-of-democracy advocates within the Turkish General Staff and the army is incapable of preventing them from arranging coup plans." However Mr. Ergin remains hopeful because of General Basbug's approach "to investigate the issue till the bitter end."

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Upcoming events:

Q October 27: A delegation of the Turkish Parliament's foreign affairs committee visits Azerbaijan.

Q October 27: Chief EU negotiator Egemen Bagis visits Finland.

Q October 27: Turkey-EU joint parliamentary commission holds a meeting.

Q November 8: CHP leader Deniz Baykal will go to Iraq to meet Iraqi President Talabani.

Q December 7: Prime Minister Erdogan will visit the US, according to widespread press and TV reports

TV News (NTV)

Domestic

Q Municipalities in Ankara, Istanbul and Izmir are disinfecting schools and means of public transportation to contain the swine flu outbreak.

Q The Health Ministry says 1095 swine flu cases have been reported in Turkey since May 15.

Q A group of relatives of martyred soldiers has filed a legal complaint against the PM and Interior Minister for launching the democratic initiative that led to the return of 34 PKK militants to Turkey.

Q Turkish Tourism Research Association says the sale of property to foreigners declined by 38 percent in August in comparison to the same month of the previous year.

Q A regulation for the sale of genetically modified food is published in the Official Gazette.

World

Q President Gul visits Serbia on an official visit for the first time in 23 years.

Q 14 American soldiers were killed when a helicopter crashed and two others collided in south of Afghanistan.

Q The trial of Radovan Karadzic is adjourned for a day by a UN court after the former Bosnian Serb leader refused to attend the opening.

JEFFREY